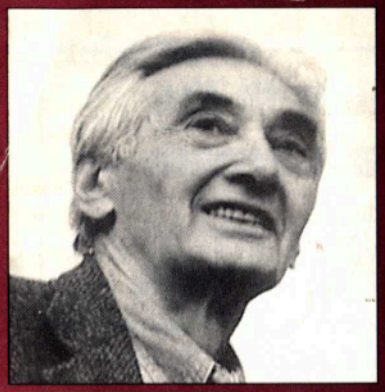

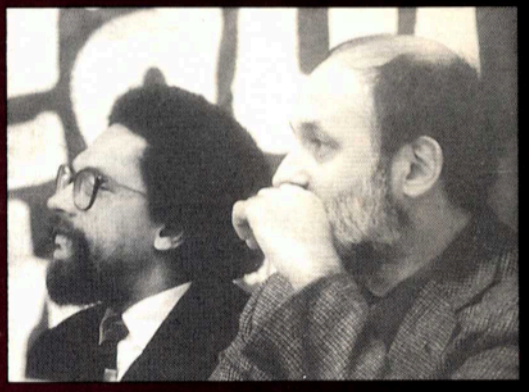

Abolish the death penalty

A CALL TO ACTION

Campaign to End the Death Penalty

P.O. Box 25730, Chicago, IL 60625

GCIU 21-C

Abolish the death penalty

A CALL TO ACTION

Speeches by:

Howard Zinn

William Keach

Lawrence Hayes

Cornel West

Robert Meeropol

Statements by Death Row prisoners:

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Jesse Morrison

Published by the Campaign to End the Death Penalty

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A pamphlet from the

Campaign to End the Death Penalty

P.O. Box 25730, Chicago, IL 60625

Greetings from Mumia Abu-Jamal

Dear Friends:

I would not surprise any of you if I spoke a sober truth: Hey y'all, you've got your work cut out for you.

For America is agrip in a spiraling death culture; politicians push death as they once pushed polio shots, as a panacea for all that ails a social order in decline, and the public, their minds roiling from the latest TV drama, latch on to this, the latest "cure."

Truth be told, the death penalty is in decline in all the areas of the world that this empire claims descent and inspiration from: Britain, France, and Italy, and indeed the entire European Community. In the matter of death, the U.S. remains, for all intents and purposes, a 3rd world nation, where the state enforces ethnic and tribal discord under the knot of the noose.

What a welcome for the dawning of the 21st century!

In all recorded and prehistoric time, this has been the bloodiest century.

With ominous new technologies, and with the unleashing of ugly, ancient racial, ethnic and tribal hatreds among men, will the 21st century rival the 20th?

That said, this is not occasion for despair.

The very fact that you exist—that you are here; that you are standing in opposition to legalized state murder is a good thing, a wonderful thing indeed.

You, all the sponsors and supporters of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty in New York, are to be commended—for you are on the right side of history.

Time will mark you all as true visionaries!

—L'Chaim! To Life! Ona Move!
M. A. Jamal, 1996

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a Black activist and journalist fighting for his life on Pennsylvania's death row. Mumia, called the "voice of the voiceless" for his advocacy on behalf of Philadelphia's poor and minority communities, was convicted in 1982 of the 1981 murder of a Philadelphia police officer. No physical evidence linked Mumia to the murder, and his trial featured one miscarriage of justice after another.

When Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Ridge signed a death warrant setting Mumia's execution for August 1995, a worldwide outpouring of protest, demonstrations and petitions resulted. In response to the protests, Judge Albert Sabo stayed Mumia's execution.

Mumia remains incarcerated, under a sentence of death, petitioning the court to grant him a new trial.

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Introduction

ON MARCH 11, 1996, the Campaign to End the Death Penalty held a forum on "Stop the Death Penalty" at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. More than 450 people attended the meeting to hear speakers call for the building of a movement to end capital punishment in the U.S.

Aisles at the meeting were jammed with people. Others spilled out of the auditorium at Harvard's Emerson Hall.

They came to hear a distinguished panel of Howard Zinn, historian and author of *A People's History of the United States*; William Keach, professor of English at Brown University and member of the International Socialist Organization; Lawrence Hayes, a former death row prisoner and former Black Panther from New York City; Cornel West, Harvard University professor of Afro-American studies, national co-chair of Democratic Socialists of America and author of *Race Matters*; and Robert Meeropol, director of the Springfield, Mass.-based Rosenberg Fund for Children. Meeropol is the son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed as "atomic spies" in 1953.

Susan Fitzgerald of the Boston chapter of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty chaired the meeting.

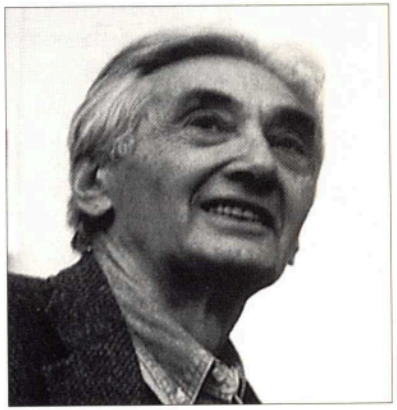
We begin (at left) with a statement from death-row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. He wrote this statement to be read aloud at the April 24, 1996 meeting which launched the Campaign in New York City. We reprint it here because of the significance of Mumia's case to the struggle against the death penalty.

The Campaign to End the Death Penalty is proud to reproduce below an edited transcript of the speeches presented at the March 11 meeting in Cambridge, Mass. We offer this pamphlet as a contribution to the ongoing struggle against the death penalty.

Howard Zinn

THERE MUST BE A LOT OF FEELING about this issue, and it's not just Mumia-Abu Jamal, it has to be more than that. Just as all the feeling that exploded around Rodney King was not just about Rodney King. It was something that went way back in history. When there's a long, long progression of injustices that goes on for a long time, the indignation builds up.

This issue of capital punishment has been addressed for hundreds of years. I mean, that's what's so infuriating. We still have to deal with the state, the murderous state, putting people to death. In 1764, an Italian writer, Beccaria, wrote an *Essay on Crimes and Punishment* in which he laid out the argument against capital punishment. And this was the period of the Enlightenment. Soon after that British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley spoke out against capital punishment. And revolutionists, right after the American Revolution, cut down the list of capital punishment crimes, which was enormous under the King, in their revolutionary fervor. You might say that the United States hasn't caught up with the Enlightenment. We're still working on that.



Howard Zinn is the author of the best-selling *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present*. Zinn earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University. From 1956 to 1963, Zinn taught in Atlanta at Spelman College, where he served as chair of the History Department. While at Spelman, Zinn became active in the civil rights movement and an executive committee member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

In 1964, Zinn joined the political science faculty at Boston University and became active in the movement against the Vietnam War. He stopped teaching in 1988 to devote more time to his family and to writing and lecturing.

In addition to *A People's History*, Zinn is the author of *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train, Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian, The Politics of History* and *Declarations of Independence.*

Karl Marx in the 1850s wrote for the New York *Tribune*. Marx wrote that capital punishment cannot be tolerated in any country calling itself civilized. It's a caution for any countries that consider themselves Marxist and continue with capital punishment.

But that's part of the emotion and the anger that I feel. I'm trying to restrain the anger, not to get violent… not to get murderous, but you know, just angry enough to do something, or to say something, or to get together with other people to organize to do something. It comes from the obvious injustice of it all. All those court rooms and all those pillars [have] those signs reading "Equal Justice For All." You can't live in this society without knowing that there's not equal justice for all. If you're poor, you don't get equal justice. Maybe it should be called not "capital punishment" but "capitalist punishment." Because it is so connected with poverty, as imprisonment itself is connected with poverty. [Applause.]

I don't want us to lose sight tonight of the fact that capital punishment is just one part of that larger spectrum of evil which is punishment by prison. Which is a million and a half people in prison. Which means that somehow, out of all the things that have been done in society, out of all the presumably evil acts that have been done in society, high and low, by all sorts of people, they have singled out a particular part of the population for punishment and left other parts of the population untouched. And especially so if you're poor or if you're Black.

There was a brief period when the Supreme Court ruled out capital punishment because it was arbitrary and capricious and so on. You should know that that brief period followed an NAACP campaign. Courts don't do enlightened things on their own. Courts do enlightened things when something has happened in the society, when movements have been created.

The NAACP fought a campaign, case by case, to fight every capital punishment case and hold it up. And then the Court said "Okay, its arbitrary." So for a few years, there was no capital punishment. Then they brought it back, [on a] 5-4 vote. It's always interesting about how many lives hang on 5-4 votes.

Just thinking of the issue of [racism] and capital punishment… A capital punishment case came up in 1982, and the Supreme Court—in the case of a Black man who was convicted by an all-white jury and where every possible Black juror had been dismissed on peremptory challenges.[1] The Supreme Court said they couldn't say that racial bias

[1] **Peremptory challenges.** Prosecutors and defense counsels are allowed to reject (to "challenge") a certain number potential jurors during the jury-selection phase of a criminal trial. When they issue a *peremptory* challenge, they do not have to give any reason for their objection to the juror's inclusion in the jury. The judge must honor their request and dismiss the juror. Both sides in a criminal trial try to get the judge to dismiss jurors whom they suspect will rule unfavorably to their side.

was involved in this. This was another 5-4 decision. How did the Court put it? I love the way judges talk. Well, discrepancy is "inevitable" in justice, they say. And also, they didn't find a "constitutionally significant" risk of racial bias. It's not a matter of is there racial bias or is there no racial bias? The question is, is there a "constitutionally significant" risk of racial bias? If you're poor, if you're Black, and if you're political… well, Mumia Abu-Jamal had all of those things working against him, to be poor and to be black and to be political.

We have a history in this country of putting people to death because they were political. In 1887, the anarchists of Chicago in the Haymarket Affair[1] were put to death, not because there was evidence against them but because they were anarchists. Sacco and Vanzetti[2] were put to death in 1927 right here in Boston—not because it is conclusively proved that they killed anybody, but because they were foreigners, they were Italians, they were certainly poor, and they were anarchists. And, well, of course there's the Rosenberg case. People who come into court as people who have been politically radical, [receive] far, far greater sentences than anybody else for the same kind of offense.

So, there's all sorts of reasons to feel angry at the system. And perhaps, maybe most of all, there's the sheer hypocrisy of it. The sheer hypocrisy of the state, the government, declaring that somebody has committed a terrible crime. They've killed somebody. They may very well have committed a crime, but they may have not committed a crime. They may have killed somebody, or two people or seven people, or nine people, or they may be serial killers and they've killed 15 people. This is the state which has killed infinite numbers of people in its history. And they are the ones making the decision that there are people who ought to be put to death.

The history of people who have been killed in labor struggles in

[1] **The Haymarket Affair.** In the midst of the national movement for the eight-hour work day in 1886, police attacked a workers' rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago. A bomb was tossed into the crowd of police, killing one of them and injuring dozens. In the days that followed, police arrested hundreds of the leaders of the labor movement in the city. Eight were convicted of murder—despite the fact that no evidence linked them to the bombing. Despite a worldwide campaign to save their lives, four of the Haymarket Martyrs were executed in 1887.

[2] **Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti** were Italian immigrant workers and political radicals. In 1921, they were convicted of a murder and robbery committed in Braintree, Mass. in 1920. Despite a six-year campaign to save them, they were executed in 1927. Their case was widely seen as an example of prejudice against immigrants and radicals.

the country by the police, by the National Guard, by the armies, is a very long and bitter and brutal history. In 1850, the first men—two tailors in New York on strike—were killed by the police. And after that, it went on and on and on. The Republic Steel Massacre[1] in the 1930s. Back in the earlier 20th century, the Ludlow Massacre,[2] the National Guard and the killing and murders. It's gone on, and on, and on. And this to say nothing about war. And not just the killing of our own, but the killing of others. Which doesn't even come into the reckoning, of course.

"This state has killed infinite numbers of people in its history. And they are the ones making the decision that there are people who ought to be put to death."

I'm not asking for capital punishment for Nixon, or for Johnson, or for Ford. Yes, even Ford, who killed an untold number of Cambodians and about 87 Americans as the result of a little incident that took place off the coast of Cambodia after the Vietnam War to show that the United States still had clout.[3] But you think of the My Lai Massacre[4] and you think of people walking away—the sheer hypocrisy of it all.

So, that kind of indignation that one must feel at all of this is something that must be conveyed to other people. They recognize it as soon as you tell them. As soon as you [ask] people, "Isn't it true that

[1] **The Republic Steel Massacre.** During the 1937 strike against Republic Steel Corp., Chicago police fired into a peaceful Memorial Day demonstration of workers and their families near the Republic plant in Chicago. Seventeen people were killed and 150 injured.

[2] **The Ludlow Massacre.** State troopers attacked a tent city of miners and their families April 20, 1914 in Ludlow, Colo., during a strike against Colorado coal mining companies. Troopers set fire to the strikers' families' tents. Thirty-three men, women and children were shot or burned to death.

[3] **Gerald Ford vs. Cambodia after the Vietnam War.** Cambodian forces captured the merchant ship *Mayagüez*, with a crew of 39, in May, 1975 in the Gulf of Siam. U.S. forces attacked Tang Island and bombed a Cambodian airbase before Cambodia surrendered the ship.

[4] **The My Lai Massacre.** U.S. forces massacred as many as 500 Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai in March 1968. In a 1971 court-martial, the massacre's commanding officer, Lt. William Calley, was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. His sentence was later reduced to 20 years. No one else was prosecuted for the My Lai Massacre, despite the fact that the U.S. military covered it up for more than a year.

poor people don't have a chance in the justice system?" They know it. That Black people don't have a chance? They know it. That radicals, anarchists, socialists, communists don't have a chance in the justice system? They know it. Remember, in the background of Mumia Abu-Jamal is MOVE.[1] They assembled 600 policemen and a helicopter, dropped bombs on houses, and they killed 11 people, including five children. Nobody ever gets brought into court for any of these things. I mean if we were bringing people into court as criminals for vicious deaths, the first people to be brought into court would be various presidents, secretaries of state, secretaries of defense and joint chiefs of staff! [Applause.]

We know all the public opinion polls show that the public wants capital punishment. Well, the public wants what they're told again and again and again. And they believe what appears before them on television again and again and again, showing heroic cops, heroic forces of government, and vicious murders and so on and so forth. But if you look at the changes of public opinion over time, you see that the public changes its mind about capital punishment. The public can change its mind again if confronted with indignation, if confronted with information and if it is just given the chance to think about it.

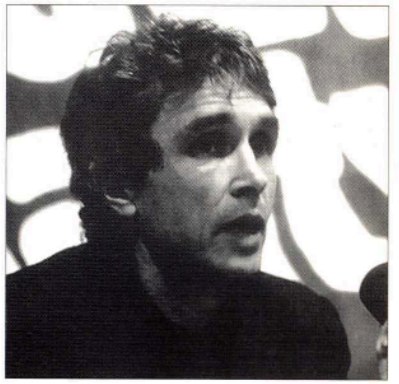
In the long haul, for capital punishment, for punishment itself, for the whole miserable jail system, the only long-term solution is a change in the society, a change in the distribution of wealth, a change in the economic system, a change in social system, a change in the culture. It'll take… a few weeks, maybe longer. [Laughter.] But the long term is something. You have to always work for the long term. Even while in the short term we struggle and fight and protest to save the life of the person who is about to be executed unjustly by a murderous state. In this immediate case, Mumia Abu-Jamal and everybody else who comes along with him and after him. So, it's great to be here with all of you. Thank you.

[1] **MOVE.** In May 1985, Philadelphia police attacked a house where members of the Black religious group MOVE lived. Police dropped an incendiary device on the house. The device caused a fire which killed MOVE members and their children, and burned 61 homes in the surrounding area, leaving 250 people homeless. As a reporter in the late 1970s, Mumia Abu-Jamal criticized the Philadelphia police's brutality in a 1978 attack on MOVE.

William Keach

I'LL JUST BEGIN BY SAYING that this great crowd tonight, I think, is practically important because all of us who feel very strongly about fighting against the death penalty have to face the fact that we're at a very urgent moment in this struggle, a very urgent moment.

It's urgent because in the country as a whole 56 people were executed in 1995. Fifty-six people. That's almost double the number of people who were executed the previous year [1994] and it's six more than the total number of people executed between 1976 and 1985.



William Keach

After earning his Ph.D. in English from Yale in 1970, William Keach taught in the department of English at Rutgers University from 1970 to 1985. Since 1986, he has been a professor at Brown University, where he is associate chair of the Department of English. Keach is the editor of a forthcoming Penguin collection of the *Poems of Coleridge* and is currently writing a book on *Politics and Writing in British Romanticism.* He is an activist with the Campaign to End the Death Penalty and a member of the International Socialist Organization.

It's urgent because in Texas, Jesse Jacobs became the first person executed in the United States in 1995—even though the prosecution argued during the trial of his co-defendant that he in fact wasn't the trigger-man in the murder for which he was being tried. But Jesse Jacob was executed anyway, even though the state argued that he was both guilty and innocent.

It's urgent because in Delaware on the January 25th of this year, Bill Bailey was hanged for murdering an elderly couple 17 years ago. It was the first hanging in Delaware in 50 years, but you need to know that Montana and New Hampshire and Washington State also allow hanging. In Washington, convicted murderers were hanged in 1993 and 1994.

It's urgent because in Utah the next day, the 26th of January, 1996, John Albert Taylor was executed by firing squad. This was the first execution by firing squad in the United States since 1977, when Gary Gilmour was executed in that way. Taylor, who was convicted of rape and murder in 1989, said that he chose the firing squad because he

wanted to make a statement about the fact that the state of Utah was sanctioning state murder. Two weeks before his execution, the *New York Times* reported that the offices of the Utah state corrections department were flooded with phone calls from people volunteering for the five-person firing squad.

It's urgent because in Texas again on the 9th of February, 1996, Leo Jenkins was executed by lethal injection for the 1988 murder of two pawn shop owners. Members of the murder victim's family were allowed to watch this execution as Texas became the seventh state in the country to allow this. Those of you who have seen *Dead Man Walking* know that Louisiana and six other states allow this sort of thing. "*He's going out really nicely,*" Linda Kelly, the mother of the two people Jenkins allegedly killed, said. "*There's nothing bad about it, I just hope God doesn't forgive him.*"

"We need to build a new, activist movement from below. We need committees in every major city and in every un-major city in this country...

Now, those of us who have been organizing and arguing against the death penalty for some time, I think, have to face the fact that our side is not winning at the moment. The pro-death penalty people have been aggressive and they've been successful. The death penalty has been reintroduced in New York, and, as you've already heard tonight, there are plenty of people in high public office who want to reintroduce it in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and other states in this region.

So, the key questions that I think we have to ask ourselves are: Why is this happening? Why this apparent rise in support for the death penalty, at least among politicians at the top of the system? And then, what can we do about it? What new initiatives do those of us who are opposed to the death penalty need to begin thinking about? And, important as the ethical and legal and socio-economic arguments against the death penalty are, I think we have to take a really hard look at the politics of the death penalty, and understand those politics within the broader framework of the politics of crime in the United States now.

Howard Zinn has already alluded to the fact that politicians in both

major parties are exploiting what I would call a kind of 'crime hysteria' at the moment. And I think we can use a phrase like 'crime hysteria,' not because people don't actually suffer from crime—of course they do, most of them people of color, poor people, living in the inner cities in this country. But I think we have to speak of a crime hysteria because most kinds of crime haven't actually increased in recent years. I mean, you don't have to look at small, progressive-minded publications or anti-death penalty publications to find this out. *Time* magazine ran a whole cover story on it in their January 15, 1996 issue, the thesis of which was that many kinds of crime—most kinds of violent crime—are, in fact, not on the rise. And yet we see politicians of both parties making 'get tough on crime' a major emphasis of their campaigns and major parts of their policy.

And the social and economic consequences of this manipulation of crime are devastating. They've created what African-American studies scholar Manning Marable calls a "political economy of imprisonment." I know a lot of you are familiar with the material facts of this, but some of them bear repeating. One and a half million people are in prison at the moment in the United States. More than 110,000 people in California alone are in prison. Thirty percent of Black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine are either in prison, on parole, or waiting for trial. Two percent of the adult workforce is in prison in the U.S.

And then there's the whole prison industry that has sprung up and burgeoned in the last few years. The Omnibus Crime Control Act, the so-called Crime Bill of 1994 passed by Congress, calls for spending $10 billion for new federal prisons, $10.5 billion on 100,000 new policemen. State spending on prisons has risen from around $6 billion in 1980 to around $30 billion in 1993, the last year for which I could find figures. That's more than a 500 percent increase. More people work in the prison industry than for any other Fortune 500 corporation except General Motors. Prison labor is generating more than $1.5 million of profit annually.

That's what's being created, I think, by this kind of politics of crime manipulation, and that's what we have to face. And when we consider the current spectrum of political opinion at the top of the system, those who are trying to do something about the death penalty by relying on the electoral process—looking to the politicians to change it—face some fairly bleak prospects.

On the one hand there's Newt Gingrich, who has called for mass public executions of drug dealers, whether they've committed a murder or not. On the other hand there's Bill Clinton, who pushed through Congress and celebrated a crime bill that expands the number of crimes for which the death penalty can be used from two to fifty-eight. This is the same Bill Clinton who in the presidential campaign of 1992 said he was personally against the death penalty and then went to Arkansas, as the governor of the state, to oversee the execution of a mentally retarded Black man, Ricky Ray Rector. He made a big deal out of it in his campaign speeches afterwards. And of course this is the same Bill Clinton who, in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, couldn't wait to call for the death penalty when he, like most other mainstream politicians, assumed that the bombing had been done by foreign terrorists.

So, why are mainstream politicians responding to crime hysteria in this way and making the death penalty a central part of their political appeal? I think it's for the same reason that they're cutting welfare, ending affirmative action, doing away with entitlements that people at the bottom of the society depend on for survival, and attacking immigrants. At a time of tremendous economic anxiety and social suffering, politicians and the corporate ruling class—whose interests they mainly represent—are looking for people to blame.

They're also looking to distract voters. If you can get voters to believe that the death penalty—or that a "three strikes and you're out" policy like the one that's being enforced in California at the moment—is going to make for an orderly, secure society, you've gone a long way towards making it easier on yourself to cut Aid to Families with Dependent Children, to cut Medicare, to cut Medicaid, to cut education funding, to cut workers' disability compensation. The death penalty, I'm saying, is a central feature of the shift to the right at the top of the political system in this country. Sadly, a good many people—not all people, by any means, but a good many ordinary people—have accepted what the politicians in both parties have been telling them about the relation of crime and punishment to the quality of their lives. And this is the thing we've got to change, this is the thing we've got to find a way to turn around.

Now, what I want to say on behalf of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty is that what this means is building a broad-based activist movement that will expose the lies of the right-wing Republican

politicians and the opportunistic concessions of the Democrats. A movement that draws opponents of the death penalty wherever they come from, whatever their reasons for being against the death penalty. A movement that can explain to ordinary people why state executions won't make their lives any better and why, in fact, executions are making their lives miserable and terrifying for the majority of poor people and people of color in this country. This is the kind of campaign, this is the kind of movement that the Campaign to End the Death Penalty is beginning to build.

Now I just want to make one thing clear. When we're talking about building an activist campaign, we don't mean to diminish the importance of groups already organized against the death penalty who've focused much of what they've done on electoral politics, on pressuring representatives at the state and national level, on providing and supporting defenses within the legal system. These efforts have been important and sometimes successful. But what those of us committed to this campaign are saying is that, given the urgency of the present political situation, we need to build a new, activist movement from below. We need committees in every major city and in every un-major city in this country that can initiate and coordinate demonstrations, rallies, pickets, debates—whatever it takes, whatever tactics it takes, to build pressure from below on politicians who are having it too much their own way.

"...committees that can initiate and coordinate demonstrations, rallies, pickets, debates—whatever it takes, whatever tactics it takes, to build pressure from below on politicians who are having it too much their own way."

And this has begun to happen already. I'll just mention two concrete instances: the chapter of the Campaign in Madison, Wisconsin, challenged a local state senator to debate. The local state senator was trying to reintroduce the death penalty. Guess who won that debate?

The chapters in Washington, D.C., and Williamsburg, Virginia joined with other activists from Virginia in mounting a demonstration against the death penalty in January. A whole series of things like that have begun to happen around the country.

We need to recall the great activist movements that have won key reforms in the past. Howard Zinn already referred to the 1972 Supreme Court decision, *Furman v. Georgia,* as not coming out of nowhere. That came out of a long struggle involving the NAACP and other organizations coming out of the late sixties that built pressure from below against the death penalty. That was during the Nixon administration—that was during the administration of *Richard Nixon.* The same thing can be said about *Roe v. Wade,* the 1973 Supreme Court decision that granted women the legal right to abortion. That came at a time when pressure from below was applied from a militant and activist woman's movement. That's the kind of politics I think we need to return to.

AND IN THIS SPIRIT I just want to end by recalling a much older activist movement, whose name those of us who are working against the death penalty often have shared. Activists working against the death penalty often refer to themselves as "abolitionists," and I think it's right—speaking here at Cambridge in the Boston area which has a special relation to the original abolitionist movement—to recall that great movement to abolish slavery in the United States. That was a broad-based movement. There were between 1,300 and 1,400 chapters across the country of the abolitionist—the anti-slavery—movement. At its most powerful it was an assertive activist movement that didn't rely on moral argument and compassion alone.

Just as I close, I would like to ask you to listen to the words of the great Black anti-slavery leader Frederick Douglass, who had seen more than his fair share of lynchings and legal executions. He said in 1853,

> *Let me give you word on the philosophy of reforms. The whole progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of struggle. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops to grow without plowing up the ground. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.*

Those are the kind of words I think we need to remember tonight. Those are the kind of words that need to be the maxim of this campaign, this activist campaign. That's the kind of spirit we need to take as we demand from those in power an end to the politics of state murder.

Lawrence Hayes

WELL, FIRST, LET ME SAY, it's an honor and privilege to be here. I've heard a lot about Harvard. Hopefully this generation of students will change what the last one created. Talking about the death penalty, I'm reminded of Calvary. What happened on Calvary is that Jesus Christ was put to death. I'm reminded of a very wise man named Socrates who was put to death for his opinions. I'm reminded of Richard Wright's *Native Son.* Bigger Thomas was a victim of ignorance and racism, of a society that neglected and abused him, and misused him.[1] This is what my story is about. I'm going to tell you what happened. You won't hear our government come out and confess it.

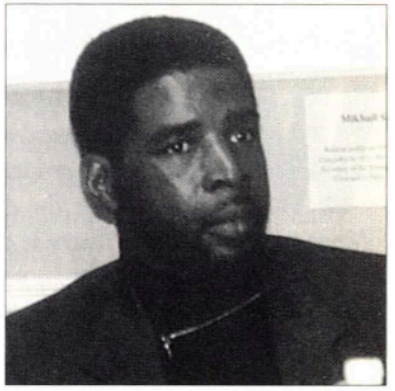
I was a member of the Black Panther Party. By the way, power to the people! I was a member of the Black Panther Party. I was a young guy back then, still am. So, you know, I didn't carry my banners and mess with guns and all. I was told to go out and set up breakfast programs, clothing programs and I had a martial arts program after school, an after-school program in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Back in 1968-69, about seven or eight kids died of ODs [drug overdoses]—junior high school kids. We were young guys. We decided we were going to rid the community of drugs. We went out and that's what we started doing.

Next thing you know, six months down the line, a guy comes up to us who wants to introduce us to a guy who just got out of prison who used to be a courier for the Mafioso drug rings. This guy came in, he started setting things up. We used to go in, we would kick the door in, we used to catch them when they had the drugs and the money. We

[1] **Bigger Thomas.** Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young Black man who accidentally kills a white woman. He is apprehended following a major manhunt, tried for murder, convicted, and sentenced to death.

used to take their drugs and throw it down the toilet bowl. This guy always wanted to get the drugs and put it back out there. We had to tell this guy, "No, that's not what this is about. You want some money? Okay, here's the money."

Then, in 1971, we went on this particular stake-out. We were basically on a stake-out in Queens. Two people went in to do surveillance and, next thing you know, we heard gunshots. I went in to the place where this was taking place. One of my partners brushed against me. He was shot in the arm. I looked in, I saw this other guy standing up in plain clothes and he had a bullet hole in his head and he fell. One thing led to another. My friend fell and I reached for him, and all hell broke loose. There was a tree in front of me and it looked like it nearly exploded. Police were everywhere, and they were shooting at us.



I got away, somehow, by some means. I got arrested at the Canadian border. I was beaten. The next thing you know, I'm sitting in a court room, people are saying things I don't understand. I didn't know anything about legal jargon. I know it now, but I didn't know any of it then. It was an all-white jury, all male, average age 55, out of Queens County. For those of you who know history, that is something to reckon with.

I was a young kid and I didn't believe that they could convict me of murder, because I didn't kill anyone. I got convicted of murder. Second of all, I didn't believe that any group of adults could sentence two kids, 19 years old, to death—me and my nephew. But they did it.

A year after I was in the death house, the district attorney in my case was disbarred for taking bribes from organized criminals. A year and a half after I was in prison, the judge in my case was cited in a *New York Times Magazine* article as being one of the 10 worst judges in New York state because of his favoritism to organized criminals. Further investigation showed that the lawyer that was assigned to me was a lawyer who frequently had clients in organized crime. And our legal system says nope, that does not work [to prove my innocence]. You have to go and you have to find some sort of conspiracy. How am I going to

do that? I was sitting in the death house cell. Seventeen years later, I get a package from some conscientious person in a [New York] state department. It said that the guy that was setting all this stuff up was on the payroll of the F.B.I.

One thing I didn't mention: The comrade of mine who got shot at the scene, who got shot in the arm—it was not a fatal wound. But yet he died, he turned up dead. When we read the autopsy report, he had a hole in his head the size of a grapefruit and every bone in his body was broken—his ribs, his collar bone. He was bruised. That's how he died. *That means when the police arrived on the scene, they kicked him and stomped him and beat him to death.*

That is American policemen. Our government is probably the most violent entity on the face of the earth. Our government responds to us with violence. I remember, over a year ago, down in the Village [Greenwich Village, New York], a group of people, homeless people—and these were mainly white people—had decided that they wanted to take one of these old, dilapidated and abandoned buildings and do something with it. And they did that. And guess what happened? Our government wanted them out! So what did they do? They sent in riot police with a tank. That is the response of your government to you. They should have sent in a bunch of counselors, or a bunch of architects—to help them. [Applause.]

Lawrence Hayes spent 20 years in New York prisons, more than two of them on death row. A long-time community activist, Hayes was a member of the Division of Social Services of the Black Panther Party in New York City. He helped to administer the division's breakfast program for children in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of New York.

Hayes was arrested in 1972 and sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit. Court decisions at the federal and state level vacated his death sentence in November 1974.

While in prison, Hayes remained an activist with the South 40 Cadre and the Exodus Cadre. He taught African-American history to other prisoners. In 1992, Hayes was awarded a masters' degree from New York Theological Seminary, earning most of his credits in prison. He is currently a counselor at the Bedford-Stuyvesant Community Conference, Inc., where he works in crisis management.

Since his release in 1992, Hayes has been an activist against the death penalty, touring colleges and communities around the world. He is a member of the Transnational Radical Party. He helped to introduce at the United Nations a resolution calling for an international moratorium on the death penalty.

I'm against crime. I don't believe that we should be going around knocking each other upside the head, and stuff like that. That's basically not right. It's not a part of the real social process. Although, if you look at the cartoons that most of our children are indoctrinated with, they teach "If you want 'em to do the right thing, hit 'em upside

the head. Beat 'em up, blow 'em up." Ever see the Roadrunner? Jeez. Don't mess with Animaniacs!

I encourage people to read *Native Son*. Read Socrates' and Plato's dialogues—the dialogue between Socrates and Plato. That is a very interesting document. I think what both of those documents do is to point to and reveal the underlying currents of our government's use of violence and death as the ultimate expression of its power. The power that we give it. I think it underlines our government's arbitrary and capricious exercise of its power to silence voices of difference, to erase its wholesale negligence of social nurturing. Governments are actually our mothers and fathers, all in one. And this is how they're teaching us how to respond to each other.

"...Our government attempts to white-wash its ignorance of people's needs and the desperate cries of people for life, for justice and equality."

One reason why I joined the Panther Party was because policemen back in the '60s were terrorists. They used to come in, kick in your door, if they were after your brother or sister, they'd knock down your mother and beat you up. If you were a little kid, they'd kick you. That's what happened. I mean, "no knock" laws[1] meant "no knock." I mean, they didn't knock. They kicked in doors.

But now that I think about it, policemen are human, just like you and I. They are our neighbors. But something happens to them when they go through the police academy. They're your homeboys and your homegirls before. But when they go in there, there's something they do to them. Now you're their enemy. You're their potential enemy. They're looking over their shoulders at you. So, I think that a part of this campaign has to be reverse psychology. I think that we have to reeducate police to let them know, "You're just like me. I'm just like you. We are all in this struggle together."

But I think another thing that these two books can reveal is that our

[1] **No-Knock.** Nixon's crime bill, introduced in 1969, allowed police to force their way into homes without announcing themselves (i.e. without knocking).

government attempts to whitewash its ignorance of people's needs and the desperate cries of people for life, for justice and equality. In New York state, which recently re-instituted the death penalty, the last real study done—which was in 1991—revealed that 73 percent of the people favored life in prison without parole and some restitution to the families of murdered victims [over executions].

Another thing is the international scene. I'm part of what's called the Transnational Radical Party. What is going on is that we have a resolution in the United Nations which calls for a moratorium on the death penalty in the year 2000 throughout the world. The United States is a contributing force in trying to prevent that. They're putting pressure on certain countries to vote against it. They are trying to block it from getting to the floor. This is what our country is doing. I would hope that we would become interested in that. Courts around the world are refusing to extradite defendants to America because of its stance on capital punishment. Some of them are Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, England. And in case you don't know, we are the only Western country that actually has the death penalty. I was just in Rome, Italy last year, '95, and I was surprised to find that none of the European countries had the death penalty. So we're isolated in that sense also.

"...We have cancer. We have accidents. We have suicides. We have war. We have street murders. We are now a nation about death. We should be a nation of healers. We should be the champions of life."

Last but not least, I would just like to say that there's a new argument on the horizon. That new argument is that we have enough death. We have enough death. We have AIDS, we have heart-attacks, we have accidents. I mean, there's enough death in our society for us to be going around promoting the death penalty, for the state to be involved in it. We have cancer. We have accidents. We have suicides. We have war. We have street murders. We are now a nation about death.

We should be a nation of healers. We should be the champions of life. I encourage each and every one of you to hold on to life and try to promote life wherever you go. If you can do that, you're supporting this movement. And I thank you again for being here.

Cornel West

THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH. I was deeply moved by the words of brother Lawrence Hayes. One thinks that after 20 years imprisonment and nearly three years on death row, if anybody has the right to be cold-hearted and mean-spirited, he does. And yet we hear compassion, a call for life. [Applause.]

And I'd like to thank and congratulate those who had the vision and determination to bring us together. We're here, in part, because we want to fight. We want to combat the escalating cold-heartedness and mean-spiritedness afoot in this land. We must never forget as we come to the end of this ghastly century, a century of unprecedented levels of brutality and bestiality, and barbarity—for two hundred million fellow human beings murdered in the name of some vicious ideology.

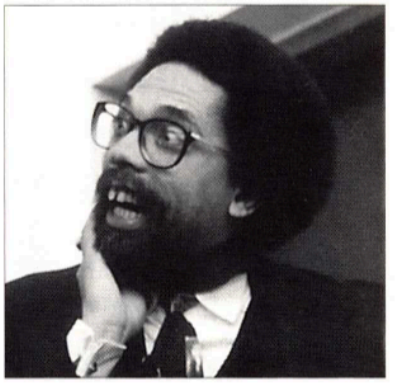
Think about it. Nazism at the heart of so-called civilized Europe. Stalinism at the core of the so-called emancipatory Soviet Union. European colonialism and imperialism in the name of Christianity, and civilization and uplift. The patriarchal household with sisters of all colors scarred and bruised every day. The closeting of gay brothers and lesbian sisters. What a century!

I know I'm here in part because I believe the death penalty is also bestial and brutal and barbaric. One of the reasons why the levels of bestiality and brutality and barbarity were able to escalate was because people did not stand up. They didn't come together. They didn't organize. They didn't dedicate themselves to at least constituting a countervailing force against what they saw escalating in their land. And I say to you in 1996, I'm not just talking about some lunatic-fringe right wing.

The death penalty is a symbol and a symptom of the degree to which large numbers of fellow citizens are reaching the conclusion that the only way to deal with overwhelming problems is to be cold-hearted and mean-spirited. And one of the roles of progressives is to provide vision

and analysis. We recognize that even if we're successful in this campaign of eliminating the death penalty, there's still police brutality. There's still sexual violence, and homophobic violence. There's still attacks and assaults on Black and brown and poor white folk this very moment. So we've got some work to do.

For me, it's impossible to talk about the death penalty without talking about the maldistribution of wealth and power. One half of 1 percent owns 31 percent of the total net wealth. One percent owns 48 percent of the total net wealth. The top 10 percent owns 86 percent. The top 20 percent owns 94 percent of the wealth. Eighty percent of fellow citizens owns 6 percent of the wealth. And then we wonder why we're at each other's throats. And there's no serious public discussion of about it. That, in and of itself, is a certain kind of violence.



Cornel West

The author of the best-selling 1993 *Race Matters*, Cornel West is a professor of Afro-American studies and philosophy of religion at Harvard University. Born in Tulsa, Okla., in 1953, West grew up heavily influenced by the Baptist Church. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Harvard in 1973, completing his degree in only three years. He earned his Ph.D. in 1980 at Princeton University.

West is the author of numerous books, including *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*; *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*, co-authored with Michael Lerner; and *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*, co-authored with bell hooks.

Of course, as democrats, we're open to arguments on the other side. We want to hear what arguments that can justify that kind of maldistribution of wealth sound like. But the fallout is economic anxiety and insecurity. People feeling as if, "Well, maybe I ought to exercise my relative powerlessness and the little power that I have against those who have less power than me." So I'll scapegoat the most vulnerable. Politicians frighten the insecure middle class, and aid and abet the well-to-do. This is the dominant strategy, not just of the Republican Party, [but also is] creeping into the center of the Democratic Party. The inability of the milquetoast liberalism of the White House and the cold-hearted conservatism of the Republican Party speak to these deeper instincts. That's the problem. [Applause.] That's the problem.

There's a slow-motion, silent depression at work in cities for over

30 years. The levels of unemployment and underemployment are not even counted, not even imagined by the Labor Department. Its national statistics do not count part-time workers looking for full-time jobs, or those who have given up looking for jobs. At the same time, there's a transfer of resources from those communities to the upper-middle classes and the well-to-do, the cut back in the programs, the slowdown in programs. And then at the work place, corporate profits are at their highest in 25 years. Eighty-one records last year on the stock market.

Yet workers—white-collar, pink, and blue—are experiencing downward mobility and fear of social slippage. The worst thing that could ever happen—even in a petit-bourgeois liberal capitalistic democracy in all of its glory and all of its flaws—is for the middle class to experience declining prosperity, and to feel as if it is losing its footing. The ways in which that anxiety and insecurity is expressed and articulated: "Those immigrants are causing the problem, keep them out of California and Arizona." "Women are causing the problem—they should have stayed in the kitchen so that the labor market would be more open to men." "It's those gays and lesbians who are causing the problem. They've complicated the culture by coming out." [Laughter and applause.]

But fundamentally, given the vicious legacy of white supremacy in this nation, you can rest assured, that most of the weight and gravity is the targeting of people of African descent. And the targeting of indigenous peoples, when they're visible in the culture. So I like that sign: [pointing to the wall] "Stop the Racist Death Penalty." Because it is impossible to talk about the history of the repressive apparatus of the U.S. nation-state without acknowledging how white supremacy has been so inextricably interwoven within it. [Capital punishment] is not confined to Black folk, but it is disproportionately targeting Black folk. It sends a message, and that message is, in part, "For those who are willing to stand up and try to speak their truths to America about the evils therein, that's waiting for you, too."

That's why brother Hayes is so important here tonight. He was willing to pay a cost. And that's serious business when you're talking about struggles against the death penalty, struggles against white supremacy, struggles against male supremacy, struggles against vast economic inequality, because the U.S. nation-state is serious when it comes to reproducing its status quo. Every nation-state deploys some

form of arbitrary power. Even a perfect legal system will still not be able to justify an irrevocable result like death. Even given the cold-hearted and mean-spiritedness of some of those who commit crime, usually against other poor people. What are we then to do?

It's impossible to talk seriously and substantively about opposition to the death penalty unless you're organized and mobilized. Not a chit-chat session. Not a question of expressing moral outrage one night, and then going back to the library. No, no, no, no. [Applause.]

You've got to be linked in some way. The outrage has to come together in such a way that in the spirit of the compassion and the care—and I would go as far as to say the love—that I heard in the voice of brother Hayes. It's got to be sustained institutionally, and sustained in such a way that we let the powers that be know, in unequivocal terms, that we're gonna fight, we're gonna sacrifice, to do what we can to hold back the increasing bestiality and brutality and barbarity.

Will we be successful? We do not know. But at least it will be said that in 1996, a campaign came along that tried to hold up the blood-stained banner of all of those folk who right now are on death row and in other parts of the prison system in this nation. That we said we are not going to go down in such a way that we

"It will be said that in 1996, a campaign came along that tried to hold up the blood-stained banner of all of those folk who right now are on death row and in other parts of the prison system in this nation. That we said we are not going to go down in such a way that we did not resist, that we did not fall prey to a moral indifference to those who were suffering."

did not resist, that we did not fall prey to a moral indifference to those who were suffering.

So again I congratulate those who brought us together. Let's attempt to sustain a momentum, a sense of motion as we link it to other issues. And, who knows, maybe by 1997 and 1998, we'll see a mushrooming of a variety of different forms of social motion that can generate the kind of social movements that we saw in the 1890s and 1930s and the 1960s. This time we'll let the rule of capital and others know that democracy is quite serious.

Robert Meeropol

I WANT TO START WITH A WORD about my cosponsorship of this event. I believe in joining together and working with others who are working against the death penalty, no matter what organization they're from and whatever work they're doing. And as time goes on, I am sure we will hear from others who will tell us, "Don't get involved with them. There's this group or there's that group involved, and you don't want to be associated with them." But the important thing here is that there is a ground swell of support. More and more people are getting involved and don't let anybody scare anybody or scare you away from it.

I want to talk a little bit personally about my own experiences with the death penalty. I think the special contribution I have to add to this evening comes out of my personal experience. My parents were executed when I was six years old. And people often wonder how much does a six-year-old understand about something like that? How much do I remember of that period? Well, I do remember. I actually remember quite a bit.

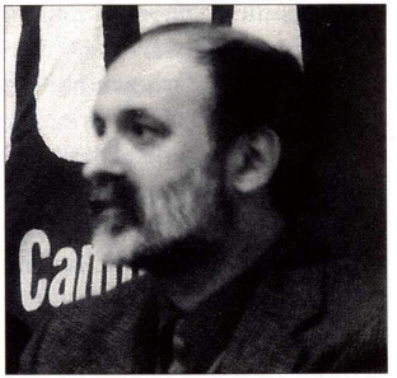
Particularly, I remember the last week of my parents' lives. Monday, June 15th, 1953: the Supreme Court adjourned for the summer. At that point, my parents were scheduled to be executed in the electric chair at Sing Sing prison in New York on June 18th, which happened to be the date of their 14th wedding anniversary. On Tuesday, a special petition was presented to Justice William O. Douglas, the Court's most liberal member, as he left on vacation. On Wednesday, Justice Douglas issued a

stay of execution. On Thursday, the Supreme Court was recalled into special session. And on Friday, the Supreme Court overturned Justice Douglas' stay by a 6-3 vote. My parents were executed one minute before sundown that Friday evening so as not to desecrate the Jewish Sabbath.

Now, I couldn't read about this in the newspaper because I was too young to read. But I heard about it on radio and I saw it on TV. And I had a six-year-old's interpretation of these events. You see, prior to June 15th, my parents' attorney had been asked to provide ten reasons why they shouldn't be killed. And when Justice Douglas issued his stay, I believed that was because the lawyer had provided ten reasons. And so their lives were spared.

When the Supreme Court was recalled into special session, my version of this was that they got back together and said to the lawyer, "You have to give us one more reason—an 11th reason." And he was unable to do so. And so they were killed.

I pretended not to understand. I didn't want adults to fuss over me. And in some ways, I didn't understand, but I got the essence. Now that I'm 48, I've come to terms with my nightmare. And in my work through the Rosenberg Fund for Children, what I try to do is to transform the destruction that was visited upon my family into something positive for other families. I can't really say that I've gotten over what happened when I was six years old.



Robert Meeropol is the son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were executed on June 19, 1953 for conspiring to "steal the secret of the atomic bomb." Born in 1947, Meeropol saw his parents arrested before he was three years old. In the early 1950s, Meeropol and his brother Michael were placed by frightened relatives in a shelter. They were later denied the right to attend public school in New Jersey. Adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol, the two disappeared from public view for 20 years.

Meeropol received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Michigan. He taught college and later became a lawyer. In 1974, he and his brother launched a national Campaign to Reopen the Rosenberg Case. Meeropol is the author, with his brother Michael, of *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.*

Leaving law practice in 1990, Meeropol founded the Rosenberg Fund for Children. The Fund is a public foundation that assists children whose parents have been "harassed, injured, jailed, lost jobs, or died in pursuit of the beliefs that all people have equal worth, that people are more important than profit, that world peace is a necessity, and that society must function within ecologically sustainable limits."

It comes out in small ways. I've always liked working with numbers. They've always interested me. And perhaps that sort of numerical focus is why, whenever I see the digital clock next to my bed flash 6:19, it sort of brings me up short. It reminds me of June 19th, the date of my parents' execution. In fact, I'm sort of brought up short every time I see the number "619" show up in one place or another. You'd be surprised how many times you can run into a number like that. And the pain doesn't stop with me. My daughter, who graduated from Harvard in 1994, wrote her honors thesis about her grandmother. The grandmother she never knew, Ethel Rosenberg. And I have her permission to quote a portion of it for you. She wrote:

"I don't forgive the government for killing my parents. There's no way for the government or for anyone else to make up for the loss or for what was visited upon me and my family. I believe the death penalty serves no positive purpose...

> *On my wall hangs a picture of my grandmother and the subject of my thesis, Ethel Rosenberg. Her presence on my wall contrasts with her absence from my life. Yes, I have pictures of my grandmother drawn by artists as renowned as Picasso and Leger, but I don't have any family photos of her. No happy images of the two of us together lying on the beach or sitting down to a family seder. The photos which clutter my desk show other familiar faces. My parents, my younger sister, my friends all gaze at me. Captured, frozen images of times remembered and shared. But the picture of my grandmother stands apart. More formal. More professional. More impersonal. This picture is the only one which does not inspire memories of past time. There are no memories of my grandmother because she was killed before I was born.*

Now, I must admit that I don't forgive the government for killing my parents. There's no way for the government or for anyone else to make up for the loss or for what was visited upon me and my family. I believe

the death penalty serves no positive purpose. It won't bring back murdered family members. It won't heal victims' shattered families. But it will shatter the innocent families of those the state executes. Now there are some opponents of the death penalty who oppose the death penalty purely on moral grounds. There were people who worked to save my parents' lives, just as today there are people working for Mumia or other people on death row, not necessarily because they believed my parents were innocent or because they believe people on death row today are all innocent, but simply because they believe the death penalty is wrong. These beliefs are often deeply felt, and they're religious or moral.

I must admit that I too believe that the death penalty is morally wrong. But I don't believe that should be our strategic focus as we mount this effort. It's a core belief. And just as strongly as we may feel the death penalty is morally wrong, there are going to be others who feel the opposite—that it's okay. This is a deeply divisive issue, and there are people who feel very strongly on one side and people who feel very strongly on the other. But as with all issues, there is a large core of people in the middle who don't feel that strongly one way or the other. Now, these are the people we must reach. Now, this is a coalition. We have room for many different approaches. I want to share mine.

"...It won't bring back murdered family members. It won't heal victims' shattered families. But it will shatter the innocent families of those the state executes."

I think we should use a two-prong approach. The first thing I think we should point out to people is the thing that's always been most persuasive to me about the death penalty. It is impossible for human beings to create a mistake-free system. That means that innocent people will die. If you favor the death penalty, you are, in a sense, saying, "I'm willing to have innocent people executed." I think most people are against that.

Now, the other thing I think we need to do is to get a little more aggressive. I think we need to expose zealous pro-death penalty advocates. You know a lot of people out there really don't care that the

death penalty doesn't deter. They don't care that it's not cheaper [than imprisonment]. They don't care that it's not applied fairly. They don't care that its application is racist. These people simply want revenge. Some of them like the idea of killing. They derive gratification from it. It provides an outlet for the violence within them that is barely hidden beneath the surface, it seems, these days. Well, they are the violent ones. They're the ones who are more likely to be moved to violence, whether it be in our streets or in their homes. They are a symptom of the sickness that is eroding our humanity in this society. State-sanctioned executions only pander to their bloodlust. It only increases the level of violence in our society. And I think if we can point this out and expose the nature of these zealots, I think we can turn the tide of public sentiment against the death penalty.

I also want to share with you, from a more historical perspective, why I think this campaign is so important. About a year ago, I was in Chicago, and a friend took me to a cemetery—Forest Home (Waldheim) Cemetery in the outskirts of Chicago. A lot of the heroes of the early 20th century American left are buried there. You can go visit the graves of Emma Goldman or Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.[1] The ashes of Joe Hill are sprinkled across the ground.[2] A local historian produced a guide, a walking tour of the graves with little thumbnail sketches of who's buried there and what their lives were like. And one of the things that struck me in reading all these sketches was how many of these people were affected by the hanging of the four Haymarket Martyrs in 1887.

For a lot of them, this was the point of their youth when they decided they would dedicate their lives to a lifetime of struggle. It sparked their commitment, and we see that in generation after generation. I don't know how many older people I have met whose politics and involvement started with the battle to save Sacco and Vanzetti's lives. And I don't know how many people have come up to me and told me that their first political involvement was the effort to save my parents' lives.

[1] **Emma Goldman** (1869-1940) was a well-known anarchist. **Elizabeth Gurley Flynn** (1890-1964) was a labor organizer and a leading member of the Industrial Workers of the World, and later, of the Communist Party.

[2] **Joe Hill** (1882-1915) was a labor organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World and writer of labor songs. He was framed on a murder charge in Utah and executed in 1915. On the night before his execution, he sent a telegram to supporters. It read: "Goodbye. Forget me. Don't mourn. Organize."

Today, we follow in our joining with some very powerful currents. I think we're at the start of what will be a monumental struggle. Not just about the death penalty, but about mass imprisonment in general. For the rest of the decade and into the next century, I believe this struggle will energize the next generation of activists just as similar struggles have energized past generations of activists.

As was said many times, there are 1.5 million Americans in prison today, and that number is skyrocketing. We have the building of prisons taking up the slack for the still-bloated defense industry now that the Cold War is over. Fear of criminals in the street has replaced fear of foreign-sponsored Communists as our biggest fear and as our excuse for gutting the Bill of Rights.

There are over 3,000 people on death row today whose lives are at stake. This effort to save their lives will be a focal point, as in the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the first United States political prisoner to face execution since my parents. His will be the biggest struggle of all. The massive eruption of protest when Mumia's execution date was set last year was just a taste of what will come. The explosive development of anti-death penalty activity in the last year is only the beginning. You here tonight have a chance to join one of the major—if not *the* major—struggles of the coming generation. There's a lot of work to do. It's time to get started.

Jesse Morrison (written statement)

Meeting chair Susan Fitzgerald of the Boston chapter of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty concluded the meeting by reading a letter from Jesse Morrison, a death row prisoner in Alabama. The full text of the letter is reproduced here.

WHY DOES AMERICA FAVOR THE DEATH PENALTY and what can be done to change this mind-set and possibly bring an end to the death penalty?

Most anti-death penalty activists choose to focus on issues such as cost, racism, education, statistics, etc. These are very key issues and arguments in opposition to the death penalty; they are the ingredients

of the death penalty which fills up the death rows across America. However, as a death row inmate myself, and a keen observer of the many components of the death penalty, I choose to focus at this time not so much on those components which make up the death penalty but instead to focus on the one component that is the driving force behind creating support for the death penalty among so many of the American people. And that one component is the emotional side of the death penalty and the mind-set or attitude it has generated. In my opinion, this is the very backbone of the death penalty, and if we are to confront the death penalty head on, we must first understand and organize against it. Become the Other Voice!!!

First of all, we must understand that the death penalty has been virtually turned into a one-sided affair, giving it the appearance of being One Voice. How did this happen? Just as there are ingredients that make up the death penalty, there are also ingredients which make up support for it. These ingredients are—a voice made up of vengeance, ignorance, the push for "tough on crime" by ambitious politicians, generating anger and fear, controlling and dominating the issue. Almost daily, we have the death penalty being paraded before the American public as a tool of justice and a safeguard against rampant spread of violence and crime. With the cry for the death penalty and its validation coming from the steps of the White House, Court House, Campaign Trails, America's Main Streets, TV, News Reports, Families of Victims, and even from some in the Religious Community, while others remains silent.

So, is there any wonder as to how the death penalty has become a Voice of Reason and Moral Belief as the solution to the social breakdown within our society?

It is said: to allow your opposition to exclusively dominate the media guarantees that you will lose the battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

Our battle today is to win the hearts and minds of the people by organizing and becoming the Other Voice. The Voice of Opposition.

I speak to you directly from Death Row, so it is easy for me to speak of a straight forward single-minded approach to end the Death Penalty. However, I do not speak to you only as a Death Row inmate, but also as a human being who values the sanctity of all life, and one who shares in your concern and belief that we must not allow ourselves to be

defined in our moral beliefs and practices by the taking of life, but by the cherishing of life.

As we look at all the components of the death penalty, and its support base in particular, we must see and understand the serious and urgent need to challenge this social ill, because not only does it kill the body of the individual, but it also kills the spirit of society. We must see the end of the death penalty not only as an objective. The challenge to end the death penalty and all injustice should be viewed as the next great frontier to be conquered.

Attempting to organize against the powerful emotional support for the death penalty is a difficult and frustrating task. But we must make every attempt to do so. Starting with not being afraid or shamed to state our opposition. Many are reluctant to let it be known to their co-workers, church members, associates and friends in general that they are opposed to the death penalty. Family members are even ashamed to share their opposition with their loved ones. We suffer in silence and frustration as the scream for killing gets louder and louder and the killing chambers get bigger and bigger.

We are greater in numbers than the supposed polls indicate. The grass roots movement to end the death penalty must include those already affected by the death penalty, as well as those most at risk of being affected. We must look to a greater commitment. Too often I see opposition to the death penalty as just another political view, and not that of a committed struggle. To effectively challenge the death penalty, it must be a solid commitment, consisting of an agenda and direction with a visible and functioning platform. Otherwise, the hearts and minds of the people remain with he who speaks the loudest and most effectively. Be the Other Voice!!

—Peace,
Jesse Morrison

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Eric Zorn, columnist, Chicago *Tribune*, Chicago, Ill.

How you can get involved with the Campaign to End the Death Penalty

The speeches reproduced in this pamphlet eloquently discuss why we need to build a movement to abolish the death penalty in the United States. The Campaign to End the Death Penalty seeks, through petitions, signature ads, concerts and benefits, forums, demonstrations and other efforts, to build a grass-roots campaign both to save individual prisoners on death row and to abolish the death penalty in the U.S. altogether.

Won't you join the Campaign to End the Death Penalty? Please fill out this form and return it to: Campaign to End the Death Penalty, P.O. Box 25730, Chicago, IL 60625. If you can make a contribution to help the Campaign's work, please make checks payable to the Campaign to End the Death Penalty.

☐ I would like to start a Campaign chapter in my city. Please send me materials to get started.

☐ I want to become active in the Campaign. Please contact me.

☐ I want more information about the Campaign.

☐ I want to make a financial contribution to the Campaign.

I enclose: ☐ $10 ☐ $25 ☐ $50 ☐ $100 Other $ _____

Name _____

Title/School/Union or other organization (for identification purposes only)

_____

Address _____

Phone _____ **Fax** _____

Campaign to End the Death Penalty

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